

Missy Elliott,
2002



PERFORMER

MISSY ELLIOTT

THE GAME-CHANGING ARTIST
IS ALSO A PIONEERING HIP-HOP PRODUCER,
SONGWRITER, AND ENTREPRENEUR.

BY AMY LINDEN

Throughout her critically acclaimed and commercially successful career, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott has been her own woman. She’s carved out her own lane and done it her own way. By 1997, the year she released her debut single, “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly),” she had already made a name for herself. The multi-hyphenate superstar is the only female rap artist to be inducted into the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame, and the first of hopefully many female rappers to be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

As a vocalist and rapper, Missy has collaborated with Dua Lipa, Lizzo, Wyclef, Mariah Carey, Eve, and Faith Evans, among others. Her six albums have gone platinum or higher, and she’s sold forty million albums worldwide. Nominated for twenty-two Grammys, she’s won four: one each for “Get Ur Freak On,” “Scream a.k.a. Itchin’,” and “Work It,” and one for the “Lose Control” video. She’s garnered eight MTV Video Music Awards plus the MTV Video Vanguard Award, a pair of American Music Awards, a half-dozen BET Awards, and the *Billboard* Women in Music Award for Innovator.

Missy has written and produced for an enviable list of artists that includes Jazmine Sullivan, the late Aaliyah, Keyshia Cole, Ciara, Tweet, Jennifer Hudson, and fellow Hall of Fame inductee Whitney Houston. In 2001, she produced the Number One remake of Labelle’s “Lady

Marmalade,” recorded by Mya, Christina Aguilera, Lil’ Kim, and P!nk.

Over the past twenty-five years, the groundbreaking artist has earned iconic status. Speaking to that impact, Busta Rhymes declared, “Queen, boss, songwriter, producer, MC, creative genius, my twin, thank you for your inspiration, your friendship, and for being one of the great and courageous forward thinkers when it came to this hip-hop culture and our art overall.”

Melissa Arnette Elliott was born on July 1, 1971, in Portsmouth, Virginia. Her childhood was difficult, marred by domestic abuse and poverty. After her father’s departure, she was primarily raised by her mother. Missy grew up singing in church, and from a young age, she wanted to perform. In 1991, she formed the all-girl R&B-rap group Fayze and recruited her friend Timothy “Timbaland” Mosely to collaborate on writing and producing songs. After Missy did an a cappella performance of Jodeci songs backstage for the group’s DeVante Swing, Swing recruited Fayze, along with Timbaland, to be part of his Swing Mob collective. Fayze relocated to New York and renamed themselves Sista, signing with Elektra. Missy also contributed, both as a featured rapper and producer, to some Jodeci tracks. But even though they released a single, “Brand New,” and an accompanying video, Sista’s 1994 debut album, *4 All the Sistas Around da World*, was shelved.



After Swing Mob dissolved in 1995, Missy and Timbaland pivoted to joint songwriting and production, working on projects for 702, Total, SWV, Puffy's 1996 remix of Gina Thompson's "The Things That You Do," and MC Lyte's "Cold Rock a Party," with Missy appearing as a guest vocalist-rapper on some of the recordings. In 1996, she and Timbaland wrote and produced the majority of Aaliyah's second album, *One in a Million*, on which Missy also sang. The massively successful release showcased Missy and Tim's futuristic blend of ambient noise and hip-hop- and jungle-influenced beats, elevating them to superstar status. Missy had become one of the few female producers in hip-hop and R&B. In just a few years, Missy and Tim had created an unmistakable, in-demand sound and an idiosyncratic aesthetic.

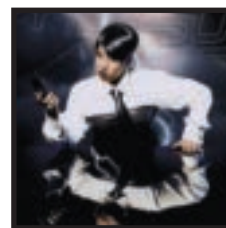
Having secured her own imprint on Elektra, the Gold-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: As part of R&B group Sista (second from left), 1994; performing in New York City, 2002; with Aaliyah at the 12th Annual Soul Train Music Awards, 1998; with Timbaland on MTV, 2006.

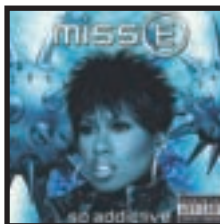
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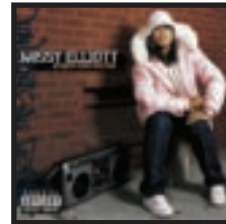
Supa Dupa Fly
Goldmind/Elektra
(1997)



Da Real World
Goldmind/Elektra
(1999)



Miss E... So Addictive
Goldmind/Elektra
(2001)



Under Construction
Goldmind/Elektra
(2002)



mind Inc., Missy began work with Timbaland on her solo debut, *Supa Dupa Fly*. In 1997, the album debuted at Number Three on the *Billboard* 200, the highest charting release for a female rapper at the time. Critics as well as fans took immediate notice. *The Economist* noted that “Elliott is to rap what Prince was to R&B.” Within a genre that could sometimes rely on the tried and true or the hot beatmaker of the week, Missy rejected the status quo sonically and visually. In *Tidal*, DJ Booth wrote, “There’s an aura of discovery to a Missy Elliott record; listening is like stumbling into another world.”

Missy had occasionally popped up in other artists’ videos, but “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” marked the first time all eyes were on her alone, and she did not disappoint. The song is built on a sample of Ann Peebles’ Memphis soul classic “I Can’t Stand the Rain.” At the time, Hype Williams

was the go-to director with a trademark of shooting subjects through a fish-eye lens, resulting in a funhouse effect. The video opens with a smiling Missy in full frame, then cuts to a downpour with Missy and her dancers wearing overalls and raincoats. But it’s the next image that sealed the deal: Missy sports a bedazzled headpiece, bug-eye goggles, and an oversized, shapeless, and inflatable black vinyl jumpsuit resembling a supersized Hefty garbage bag. The look is startling, playful, and just plain weird; she’s serving Afro-futuristic astronaut meets Michelin Man (or woman) realness. The WTF look is remarkable not only due to its being totally out there, but because it signaled a new possibility for women in rap, who were often hypersexualized. According to *Vibe*, it was about “Elliott unapologetically flaunting her Blackness in a liberating and predictable manner for all the world to see.”



THIS PAGE: Leading the crowd at the Splash! Festival, Germany, 2010. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Grammy happy in 2003; street style, 2002; with Katy Perry at the Super Bowl XLIX Halftime Show, 2015; at the MTV Video Music Awards with Lizzo, New York City, 2019; launching Respect M.E. Adidas sportswear line, 2004; at the Wireless Festival, London, 2010.

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“The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” was just the beginning. The next single, “Sock It 2 Me,” was also a hit and accompanied by another crazy video, this time with Missy as a cross between a superhero and a video game character. Missy was now the one to beat. But truth be told, she had no competition: Nobody was doing what she did.

Missy’s second album, *Da Real World* (1999), would sell three million copies worldwide. Singles included “All N My Grill” and a “Hot Boyz” remix, which showcased a more sexual facet of Missy’s persona. Two years later came *Miss E . . . So Addictive*, debuting at Number Two on the *Billboard* Top 200 and selling two hundred fifty thousand copies its first week. The album includes such smashes as the sly and sexy “One Minute Man” and “Get Ur Freak On,” which quickly became one of her signature songs. Directed by Dave Meyers, the “Get Ur Freak On” video also exemplified Missy’s clear-cut and deliciously out-there creativity.

Missy continued working with other performers, notably her protégé Tweet, whose 2001 single “Oops (Oh My),”

cowritten by Missy and featuring her background vocals, hit the Top Ten. But Missy wasted no time dropping more of her own music. In 2002, *Under Construction* sold 2.1 million copies, making it the biggest album by a female rapper at the time. *Under Construction* contained the saucy Number Two smash “Work It,” accompanied by another bananas video and a hook that proved that Missy could literally “put my thing down, flip it and reverse it.” *Under Construction* was heralded by the *New York Times* as “this year’s best hip-hop album” and yielded the Top Ten hit “Gossip Folks,” featuring Ludacris.

This Is Not a Test! came the following year, and in 2004, Missy branched out into fashion, partnering with Adidas Originals on Respect M.E., a line of women’s footwear, accessories, and apparel. Missy had long shown love for the brand (in the tradition of fellow Hall of Famers RUN DMC), but the deal with Adidas made the love affair official. A year later, Missy released *The Cookbook* – the first time Missy opted to not work solely with Timbaland. The album included the Number Three hit “Lose Control.”





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Backstage at MTV's *Total Request Live*, 2004; the star gets her star, at Hollywood Walk of Fame Star Ceremony, Los Angeles, 2021; with Queen Latifah (left) and Cardi B at the MTV VMAs, 2019.



After taking some time off, Missy roared back with her first EP, *Iconology* (2019). The leadoff single, “Tempo,” featured Lizzo – a pairing that fans agreed was a perfect combo. Since then Missy has continued to do production and features, most recently working with Skrillex and Bree Runway. In 2019, she received the Women’s Entrepreneurship Day Music Pioneer Award at the United Nations, recognizing her achievements in music and leadership. That same year, Missy was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music from the Berklee College of Music and in 2023 was a highlight of the Grammys’ televised

tribute to hip-hop’s fiftieth anniversary, solidifying her place in the canon.

There have only been three women inducted in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame their first year of eligibility, and Missy Elliott is one of them. That she joins that elite club speaks volumes to the respect she’s earned. It’s also a testament to her artistry and singular approach to everything she does. As Missy herself put it, “Copy-written so don’t copy me.” But she doesn’t have to worry: The first woman rap artist to enter the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is a genre unto herself.

Onstage at the
Lovers & Friends
music festival,
Las Vegas, 2023

